Could Video Games Be Good For Our Mental Health?

Community NerdyBirdy Oct 8, 2021

It’s not exactly a secret that mental health and wellness is a serious concern for millions of Americans. Our mental health affects every aspect of our lives, from work and relationships to the enjoyment of leisure and new experiences. As mental illnesses often have a debilitating effect, it’s become increasingly important for many to prioritize their mental health.

Unfortunately, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, as many as 20% of American adults had a mental illness in 2019. This was further exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In December of 2020, the US Census Bureau reported that 42% of adults surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety or depression.

While severe mental illness should always be treated by a medical professional, many without mental illnesses still struggle with maintaining daily mental well-being. Lack of access to mental health services or supportive communities can also compound difficulties.

The Importance of Leisure

A growing body of research shows that our ability to take time for and enjoy leisure is critical for our general health and mental well-being. “It’s important to understand the value of leisure time” Erica Price, a recreational therapist told Sharp.com. “Finding balance between work and play, nurturing a healthy leisure lifestyle helps us manage stress, reduce burnout and increase productivity”.

Navigating setbacks and burnout and stress management are all important goals for modern adults, and leisure time is essential for allowing the brain to reset and recharge. One leisure activity that has grown in popularity is gaming. This is unsurprising to most gamers. While many media headlines are still obsessed with attacking gaming as a highly addictive or even compulsive habit, for most gamers, gaming is a healthy, fun, and enjoyable hobby.

Recent research has even shown that playing video games can have widespread benefits for mental health. In a breakthrough study released by Oxford University, researchers found that participants who played more video games reported greater overall "wellbeing" when compared to those who played less video games or none at all. The study was noteworthy for being the first to use actual play-time data, in comparison to self-reported data, and for using commercially available video games.

Other studies have even suggested that playing video games can improve mental health outcomes. Researchers from the Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Software found that commercial video games could alleviate symptoms of depression in study participants, such as reducing anhedonia, or the loss of pleasure. Glenn Platt, a professor of Emerging Technology at Miami University in Ohio, described the potential benefit as "Video games provide connection, a critical aspect of mental health, feeling like you are part of a community of like-minded people who value your participation and share your goal within the game".

Gamers often describe the soothing and anxiety alleviating effects that video games have on their lives. Growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, video games were more than just an escape from the searing desert heat for writer and actress Ashly Burch. They were also a soothing respite from the stresses and anxieties of adolescent and teenage life. "I have an anxiety disorder and it crept up pretty intensely when I was about 10" Burch said. "The only thing that could calm me down was playing video games". Burch later described the effects as "All I know is that it was seemingly the only thing that helped sooth me".

Video Games as Mental Health Care

As more research shows that video games can have a therapeutic effect on our mental health, the use of video games could act as a significant expansion in access to mental health support. Unlike traditional mental health care, video games are much easier to access, and can be used or purchased without the societal stigmas that still exist against mental illnesses.

Michael L. Birnbaum, a physician and assistant professor at the Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, explained that "Video games could offer

greater access to adjunctive therapeutic intervention as they can be played at home and at any time, as opposed to traditional care, which typically occurs less frequently and can be prohibitively expensive”.

However, it should be restated that video games should not be seen as a cure for mental illness, or as a replacement for other professional or medical treatment. Video games can be a powerful tool in promoting mental health, not as a sole treatment.

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day this October 10th, we should also recognize the impact that video games can have on our mental well-being. Many gamers have openly spoken about the benefits that video games have had on their mental health, especially during times of extreme stress or difficulty. What are some moments that video games have helped you relieve stress or symptoms of mental illness? How have video games positively impacted your mental well-being?